

Tomahawks From The Top

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}

Thursday, May 05 2011 9:45 AM - Last Updated Thursday, May 05 2011 6:51 AM



As the Good Ship Tribe steams along on the West Coast, the population on the North Coast find themselves spending the week happily letting their wives/families clear out their DVR early in the evening (we've been working our way through "Party Down" on Netflix via Roku) before hunkering down for some late baseball from the Bay Area...because how could you be missing a minute of this ride?

Now 20-8 after Tuesday's win, paced by – stop me if you've heard this before – a fantastic outing for their starting pitcher, sticking around long enough for the offense to piece together enough runs to establish a lead, and a lockdown bullpen coming into shut the door.

Is it odd to be expecting this to happen?

While I'll stop short of saying that I'm sitting here watching the games, just waiting for the Indians to break through to a lead while the starter holds serve for about 6 to 8 innings, and then see the bullpen preserve the victory....OK, maybe I won't stop short of saying it.

Regardless, the Indians continue to win...blah, blah, blah...biggest run differential by 12 RUNS...ho hum...best record...yada yada yada. I'd like to say this is getting old.

But it isn't.

And with that, let's get some Tomahawks that probably won't reach as high as the Indians are flying right now, but that has more to do with the current cruising altitude for the Tribe than anything else...

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While the pieces continue to pour in regarding the viability of the Indians in the long-term, a troubling acceptance of the fact that the Indians' schedule has been weak to date has been used to justify the Indians' hot start. While many of the teams that they have played came in with similarly low expectations as there were preconceived notions that Baltimore, Kansas City, and Seattle (in particular) are AL fodder, consider the records for the teams that the Indians had faced through Monday thus far on the year NOT including the games against the Indians:



KC: 13-8

LAA: 14-12

BOS: 13-12

BAL: 13-11

SEA: 13-13

DET: 12-14

CHI: 9-18

MIN: 7-18

Again, those records are for each team excluding games against the Tribe (KC was 15-13 heading into Tuesday, but 2-5 against the Tribe)...so of the 8 teams that the Indians faced through Monday, 5 of them had winning records if you take out the games that those teams played against the Tribe.

Notice which 3 teams have losing records against the rest of the AL, not including the Indians? Your prohibitive favorites going into the season, most notably the White Sox and Twins, both of which actually have winning records against the Erie Warriors...it's just the rest of the league that has killed them.

So while the Indians may be "beating up" on the teams that were thought to be the doormats of the AL when the season started, we're now a full month into the season and the teams that the Indians have played have a body of work against other teams to provide some context.

In terms of context, do you know what teams the Yankees have played so far in their 7 series through Monday?

FIVE of the eight teams that the Indians have played with the only differences being the Yankees playing the Rangers and Blue Jays while the Indians played the Angels and Royals. Otherwise, both the Yankees and Indians have played the Orioles, the Red Sox, the White Sox, the Tigers, and the Twins.

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Know what the records for the Indians and Yankees are against those common opponents this year?

The Tribe is 10-4 against those 5 teams while the Bronx Bombers are 12-6, meaning that the Yankees' record is "propped up" by a soft schedule just like the Indians seems to be...at least if you believe every piece that you've read concerning whether the Indians are "for real".

But because of expectations, projections, and (frankly) payroll, you won't read that in any story about the start to the Yankees season. And yet, we can't get away from the "soft schedule" misnomer of the Indians' April.

Speaking of overblown storylines in the early season, most of the analyses on the Indians' hot start and its sustainability have focused on certain players exceeding expectations and some line that intimates that "as soon as Santana and Choo get going, the level of production should start to come from the expected players in the lineup.

While that's all well and good when you look at the season statistics for Santana and Choo, realize that since the Baltimore series in mid-April, Santana has an .845 OPS and Choo has an .804 OPS. While you might expect Choo to continue to ramp up his production, those numbers are nothing to sneeze at over the last 2 ½ weeks, the reality is that both players have started to rebound into shape.

Interestingly, if you use the Baltimore series when Grady returned (and that was five series ago) as the starting point, here are the compiled OPS from that time for all Tribe players with more than 40 plate appearances since the beginning of that series through Tuesday:



Hafner – 1.141

Sizemore – 1.058

LaPorta – 1.013

Hannahan - .895

Santana - .845

Choo - .808

Brantley - .804

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Uncle Orlando - .718

Asdrubal - .705

As I slowly back away from my “cancel The OC” crusade (although it’s a suggestion that will come about from others as the season progresses...trust me), take a look at those players and the order in which they appear in terms of OPS over the last 2 ½ weeks. Um...with the exception of Supermanahan up there, isn’t that group at the top of the list the names that you could conceivably see pacing the Tribe offensively in 2011?

Maybe not at some of those huge numbers at the top, but that list looks like Hafner and LaPorta (who has shed the “MaTola” name tag) providing the power, Sizemore evolving back into a special player, Choo and Santana providing some stability in the middle of the lineup (even if their season totals still underwhelm) and Brantley’s OBP pacing his production. Is that irrational to figure as a harbinger of things to come instead of an aberration?

While this season has been a revelation, are any of those numbers (outside of Hannahan) wildly out-of-whack, if you consider what Sizemore and Hafner have done in MLB in the past and the pedigree of LaPorta’s prospect status? The point is that this offense is sustainable and it’s coming around to the point that the players that are SUPPOSED to be contributing (Santana, Choo, LaPorta Sizemore, and Hafner) are doing so, as it’s not too hard to see a top-to-middle-of-the-order emerging here with some consistent production – not to mention some thump – in the batting order.

Back to the initial premise though, as Santana and Choo may be near the bottom of the list, but each player has posted an OPS over .800 in the last 16 games. For some context for that, 31 players in the AL (out of the 97 qualified players) have posted an OPS over .800 on the season so far, so...yeah, Choo and Santana have begun to re-assert themselves since the start of that Orioles series.

In fact, if you’re using that Orioles’ series as a kind of turning point (since that is when Grady returned, realize that the Indians have averaged 5.69 runs per game since that time en route to a 12-4 record in those games.

Is that level of production sustainable?

No, probably not as the team’s OPS in those 16 games is .837 (and their ERA is 3.34 over the last 16 games...again, probably not sustainable at that level), but the production in the lineup over the last 2 ½ weeks is coming from the expected sources. Perhaps you’d like to see more production out of Santana given the glimpse of what could be that he gave us out of the gate last year, but The Axe Man has now played in a TOTAL of 72 MLB games and just logged his 300th plate appearance in MLB this past weekend. In that time, he has walked more than he has struck out and has a career .808 OPS as a 25-year-old catcher.

Not to bludgeon you over the head with my justification of “don’t worry about Santana”, but just to provide some compelling context on what he’s done, realize that there are 6 players in MLB who have more walked more than they’ve struck out since the beginning of 2010 AND posted an OPS over .800 with more than 300 plate appearances.

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Those players are Al Pujols, Miggy Cabrera, Chipper Jones, Ian Kinsler, Joe Mauer, and one Carlos Santana.

Read those names again and let that sink in...(waiting a beat)...and if you're really worried by The Axe Man hovering around the Mendoza Line in the first month, realize that Santana's name is the only one in that sextet for whom 2010 represents his first exposure to MLB pitching.

Trust me, there's plenty more where that came from in terms of asserting the rarified air that Santana sits at the precipice of, but he looks to be turning into a key cog in the Indians' offensive attack. Judging by the offensive numbers of the past 2 ½ weeks put forth by the Indians, he doesn't look to be the only one...

As for the other component of the team that may just be performing at a level that could be expected for the rest of the year, did everyone know that the quartet of C. Perez, Sipp, Pestano, and R. Perez collectively has a collective ERA of 1.50 and a collective WHIP of exactly 1.00...all of this coming in 48 innings of work?

Of course this is impressive, but the performance of relievers always goes above simply stating ERA and WHIP as relievers are summoned into all sorts of situations, both sticky and relatively clean and it is in examining the situations to which this quartet have pitched give a truer appreciation of what is being accomplished. By that I mean that Rafael Perez has yet to give up an earned run which, on the surface, looks impressive...because it is over 11 innings of work.



However, consider that Rafael Perez has inherited 11 runners already in the young season (5th most in baseball), stranding all except for 3. He has, in effect, stranded 73% of the runners that he's inherited and in the 12 games he's pitched, there have been runners on base in 7 of them. While you may scoff at the 73% runner stranded mark, realize that of the relievers that have inherited more than 10 runners thus far on the season, Perez's mark puts him 4th in MLB, behind the White Sox Will Ohman, the Royals' Aaron Crow, and one Vincent William Pestano of YOUR Cleveland Indians, who has only allowed 1 of the 10 runners he's inherited to score.

Like Perez, Pestano has generally entered games with runners on (6 of his 12 appearances) and his effectiveness if wiggling out of jams not of his own making has provided the yin to Perez's yang out of the bullpen in terms of serving as those bridges over troubled waters from

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the starters to Sipp and Perez.

By building those bridges in the 6th and 7th innings, R. Perez and Pestano have allowed Sipp and C. Perez to enter games with the bases empty for the most part. In Sipp's 13 appearances, 11 have come with the bases empty and of Pure Rage's 13 appearances, all but one have him entering the game with unoccupied bags. By the way, Chris Perez has inherited one runner and Tony Sipp has inherited two, with all three runners being stranded by those two pitchers. So not only are the Indians' relievers taking care of their own business, they're cleaning up after the rest of the staff...and there may be more help on the way.

While Nick Hagadone is getting a lot of pub (and rightfully so, with a WHIP of 0.62, 22 K to just 5 BB in just 14 1/3 IP) in Akron, his teammate there could be another name to watch as Aeros' closer Cory Burns has now struck out 17 hitters in only 8 innings of work, walking just one in the 9 games he's pitched. If you're amazed by that, realize that Burns has faced 35 hitters this year in AA and he has struck out NEARLY HALF OF THEM in the first month of the season.

As the parent club's bullpen looks to be rounding into shape, legitimate options like Hagadone and Josh Judy (15 K...but 8 BB in 11 1/3 IP) are already on the 40-man (not to mention Frank Herrmann) with players like Burns, Zach Putnam (14K, 3 BB, 0.65 WHIP, .374 OPS against in AAA) are just as obvious replacements for the day if/when something goes "SPROING" in the Indians' bullpen.

By now you know that Jess Todd was the 40-man casualty to make room for Al White and Todd, like Jensen Lewis before him, simply became a casualty of other players passing him up in terms of likelihood to contribute both in AAA and AA as compelling options seem to abound – and by that I mean compelling options for this year.

Given what the Indians did with Al White (and here's [a nice read from B-Pro's Kevin Goldstein](#) on

[something I hit on when the promotion of White was intimated](#)

in terms of an organizational shift of going for it now), is there any doubt that they wouldn't have a problem calling up Hagadone this year if he represents the best option, much less rostering and calling up Burns or Putnam if they're deemed to be worthy of a bullpen that looks deep now...and whose depth seemingly knows no bottom.

Now if you'll excuse me, it's time to go watch one last "Party Down" before watching MY first place Cleveland Indians continue their assault on the American League and asking you to ignore the growing bags under my eyes...